

ONI Section VII: Spartan III: Zodiac Squad

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Summary: An ongoing tale of the Spartan III squad, codename: Zodiac.

1. Chapter 1: Meet the Squad

It was a 0400 hours aboard the UNSC Ask and Ye Shall Receive, a UNSC Prowler under the command of ONI section 7. The faint hum of the engines was the first thing Antares heard as he came out of Cryo. It was always the first thing he heard, even before the strange hissing noise that the cryo pod made when it opened up. Antares blinked his eyes to re-adjust to the dim lighting in the cryo bay, it seemed like the lights were flickering but he couldn't tell, that might just be the after effects of what felt like a year in cryosleep. Antares looked around as the other 5 cryo pods slowly opened, making that same hissing noise as each member of the squad slowly gained consciousness. There were nine of them at one point, but Stephen... Pollux... had been forced to stay behind due to injuries he received during their last op.

That mission had been just one nightmare after another. First Hamal's pod had malfunctioned and exploded before they even hit orbit, and then Al Tarf was killed when he was stuck by one of the covvie's plasma grenades. His last words had been "How do they keep them from sticking to their own hands?" before he rather unceremoniously exploded. "We killed every last Covvie there for that one." Antares muttered before cracking his neck; he was always sore after a long cryosleep. He walked over to his locker while the others were still waking up and put on his undergarments and black body suit. Antares didn't think they'd have to be suited up immediately. After all, no one had been there when they woke up screaming at them to get their asses in gear. "Good thing too or I probably would have snapped whoever it was in half," he chuckled to himself. He had a habit of doing that after getting out of cryo. His only explanation was that the rest of the squad had nothing resembling conversational skills for at least 15 minutes once they came out of cryo sleep. Antares heard what sounded like a cough and looked over. It was Antoin

coughing, "Hey Sada, you sick?" Antares called over to him. Antoin looked over at him and grunted out in between yawns "Bro, do you have to use the code names when we're off duty?" "But we're not off duty. If we were then we'd still be in those lovely pods" chimed in Zach (Codename: Alde). "Everyone shut up, it's too early in the morning for me to have to listen to you idiots arguing" hissed Chris (Codename: Denal). "Aw come on Uncle Chris, you know you love us" It was Gabriel (Codename: Spica), the youngest member of the squad who interjected that flowery remark; Chris just glared and went to his locker, pulling a pack of cigarettes out before walking into the hallway for a smoke. You could hardly blame the guy for being a bit testy. He and Hamal had been close.

Just then James (Codename: KAs), the squadleader yawned and asked, to no one in particular, "So, where's the CO, or couldn't he be bothered to wake us in person?" When no one answered James announced, "Well then if no one has any ideas I'm going to get back to my nice comfy cr-" before being cut off by the voice of Captain Verten. "Sorry for the early wake up Spartans, but we just received a top priority mission that requires our immediate attention, suit up and meet me in the briefing room on deck 16, Verten out. "Well you heard the man, suit up," said James in a rather lax tone before adding "That means you too Chris."

In almost no time at all the six Spartan III's were all geared up. It wasn't the standard SPI armor most of the S3's received, but Mjolnir mark V armor with varying modifications they were part of the special Section 7 Initiative, a special test program where a select few squads of S3's received the Mjolnir powered armor usually reserved for the more expensive Spartan II's.

Once they were all assembled, they quickly walked to the lift and went to the sixteenth floor. Captain Verten was waiting outside the briefing room and ushered them inside as soon as they arrived. "Spartans" Verten sighed, "yesterday, at 02200 we received classified orders from ONI section 7. They have discovered a forerunner artifact on the planet we've identified as Eden Minor. We've been assigned to deploy you to the planet and recover the artifact."

Verten paused for a moment, but before he could begin speaking again Zach asked "Sir, pardon this but doesn't that seem like something you could send regular marines to do?"

Verten stared at Zach for a moment before shaking his head and saying "Normally yes, we wouldn't have even been informed of this, however, there are reports that there is a covenant cruiser nearby and that they have already deployed forces to the planet to capture the artifact for themselves..."

End of Chapter 1.

2. Chapter 2: Prepare to drop

James stared at Verten and sighed. It was his usual sigh, one filled with unwarranted exasperation and world weariness that seemed as though it had taken a lifetime to perfect; almost an art form really. "Sir, I still don't see why WE have to be the ones to do this. This seems like something an ODST squad could handle. If not that, then why not just fire our prototype O.D.P. Cannon?" Verten shrugged and

before stating "The O.D.P. Cannon is as you said, A PROTOTYPE; hell it hasn't even been field tested. The only reason we have it is as a last resort before enacting Cole Protocol and scuttling the ship. That's why we're sending you down to retrieve the artifact, covertly."

Verten then brought up a simulation of the planet below before saying "This is all we could get from a cursory scan of the area. We would have done a more extensive scan except we would have had to drop our cloak and likely expose ourselves to the covenant cruiser." The image projected looked like some sort of ancient temple. . "Sir, it looks like the ruins we discovered on Onyx and Arcadia." said Antoine as he shifted in his seat. "Yes, but unlike those two, this one appears to be active and I'm worried that the Covenant might use this to gain an even BIGGER technological advantage on us then they already have. Now enough talk, I'm going to brief you on the mission. During our initial scan of the area we detected a powerful energy signature emanating from below the Forerunner structure. Your objective is to find and retrieve whatever is the source of that signal."

James sighed again before leaning forward and saying in the same monotone he did everything else, "Sir, have you considered that this object might be just a tad big for 6 men to carry by ourselves, let alone past the army of Covvies that we'll be sharing that space with."

"Look on the bright side James, you'll be able to catch up on the scoreboard," chimed Gabriel. Gabriel was a strange comparison to James, consistently filled with energy and frequently making even the worse situations into competitions between the two of them. Antares rarely participated, nor did the rest of the squad; it was a silent understanding that whatever it was that motivated Gabriel to challenge James at every turn was between the two of them and that anyone interfering in even the most trivial of their contests was like walking naked and bleeding into a pool of starved piranhas.

Verten just shook his head, not bothering to ask what it was they were talking about. Verten had been working for ONI for several years and found that in cases such as this, it was better not to ask. "Well if you can't bring it back to the Ask and Ye Shall Receive then I want you to destroy it. We can't risk it falling into Covenant hands."

Antares finally decided to address the problem that had been nagging at the back of his mind. "Sir, how exactly do we get to the planet, let alone return from it?"

"Well spartan, you'll be inserted two miles from the structure using the SOEIVs that you used during your last mission. The UNSC Harkonnen, The UNSC Compton, The UNSC Painted Lady, The UNSC Firebrand, and the UNSC Flying Swallow, two Valiant class cruisers and three destroyers will be providing fire support and a valuable distraction for this mission. We'll remain cloaked for the entirety of the mission. Once you set down on the planet the Harkonnen and the Compton will deploy large numbers of their troops to provide a distraction on the ground. After you radio for extraction, the Harkonnen will send down a pelican which will then bring you back close enough to the Ask and Ye Shall Receive that you can make an EVA jump to our airlocks without us having to

de-cloak."

"What of the five ships that will be backing us up Sir?" replied Antares.

"As soon as we jump into slipspace they'll retreat in the opposite direction give the Covenant a black eye they won't soon forget."

"I'd prefer we give them two, one for each Spartan we lost last mission," grunted Chris. He was still mad about Hamal, and like anyone who has lost a comrade; Chris wanted revenge.

Verten stared at him and made a mental note to give him extra doses of his anti-depression meds. Chris pulled out a cigarette from a compartment on his armor and lit it. "You're going to kill yourself Denal," sighed Antares. "Those cigarettes are radiation medicine that he has to take due to his extensive exposure to radiation during Operation: PROMETHEUS,"* said Verten in a rather matter-of-fact voice.

"At any rate, we've got roughly 3 hours before the Harkonnen and the Compton arrive within maximum engagement range. The Painted Lady and the Firebrand are scheduled to arrive roughly an hour after the Harkonnen and the Compton do. However, the Flying Swallow won't arrive until the at least two hours after that. At 0900 hours we're going to officially begin the operation; unfortunately for you, you're being deployed in about 5 minutes. You've got 3 hours to map as much of the territory surrounding the structure as you can and use a dummy radio beacon to transmit it to the Ask and Ye Shall Receive, once you've done that, I want you to make your way to the structure and find a way in. From there we won't be able to do anything but buy you time and hope that the Covenant doesn't overpower us before then. Spartans, get your gear and prepare to drop. DISMISSED!"

The six spartans moved silently to the armory and picked up their gear before heading to the launch bay. The timer for their drop was 2 minutes and 10 seconds. Antares strapped himself into his pod and watched as the others did the same before a maintenance officer shut the doors on their pods. Antares' comm buzzed, "You guys ready?" It was the maintenance officer.

"As we'll ever be," replied Zach, breaking his silence.

"Well then spartans, good luck. Launching in

5.

4.

3.

2.

1.

DROP!"

End of Chapter 2

Chris was pulled out near the beginning of the operation due to taking a direct hit from a Fuel Rod Gun, thereby exposing him to extremely high amounts of radiation

3. Chapter 3: A smudge on the scope

3.

2.

1.

"DROP!"

And for a brief moment, silence. All seemed still, like a painting. Slowly, the world began to move again; the painting becoming more like a dream, one that Antoine had had a million times before. Antoine turned his head slightly; looking out onto the vastness of space which never ceased to amaze him. He knew that in just a few hours this perfect stillness in the skies above Eden Minor would become a horrific blaze of death and sorrow. Men would die, families would hear about how their loved ones had sacrificed themselves for the greater good and feel no better for hearing it. Antoine wondered about his family who he had barely known. Taken from the dying colony of Sigma Eltos by ONI after his family had been murdered and nearly the entire colony glassed, Antoine could barely remember his mother's face. He did, however, remember in horrible clarity, her dying face; the mask of horror stretched across her face as the plasma pistol charge seared through her chest cavity. Antoine had snapped. He picked up a kitchen knife and viciously stabbed the grunt that had shot his mother until he was sure it was dead. He then spent the next several hours hunting down any Covenant he could find. He had been lucky that he had only run into one elite. He had taken its shields down with the same charged shot that the grunt had used to kill his mother and thrown his kitchen knife in its eye before running as fast as he could until he collapsed from exhaustion. That was when ONI picked him up; but that was another story for another day.

"Enough nostalgia," he grunted to himself, focusing on the mission. He could feel the heat of the atmosphere, even through all the pod's protective measures. The small screens on either side of his pod showing the other 5 squad members were beginning to crackle and buzz with static. From what Antoine observed, Gabriel was humming. Antoine managed the closest thing one could get to a shrug in that tight space and even managed a small laugh. On the upper right screen Sam moved his head to where Antoine presumed the screen displaying him was located.

Antoine swore he could see Sam raising his eyebrows even through the polarized lenses of his Mark V helmet. Just then the shaking began. The pod had just hit the lower atmosphere. This was the most dangerous part; the part where they hoped their presence would go unnoticed by sheer virtue of luck. Just then Antoine saw James' pod hit the tree line and managed a chuckle to himself. "Right, that and the whole risk of death on impact. Forgot about that." He braced himself for the shock and just in time; mere moments after the pod hit the ground hard. Even through the pod's cushioning and his armor

he felt it, he breathed and slowly pressed the button to release his pod's door release. As he pushed down on the button the bolts blew and sent the door flying off, making a loud clang as it collided against some boulders. "And they say these things are meant for stealth insertions. If the Covenant used their eyes instead of their sensors we'd have been shot out of the damn sky as soon as we hit orbit."

"Hey Sada, you comin?" said Sam, breaking Antoine's brief peace and reminding him that they were on a mission. "Yeah, yeah Sam I'm coming."

"Antares," Said Sam flatly.

"What?" replied Antoine. though he already knew what Sam was talking about, it was always funny hearing his explanation.

"On missions you call me Antares."

"Why?"

"Because it's protocol."

"You know protocol's gonna get you killed one of these days, Sam," interjected Gabriel, in an obvious attempt at a joke.

"And your inability to take anything seriously is gonna get us ALL killed, Spica. Now let's rendezvous at that hill about 2 miles north of here. KAs, I recommend we maintain radio silence until we get there."

"Fine, if you think it's necessary." James had a habit of not arguing with Sam when he gave the squad commands, it wasn't worth the battle.

Gabriel stood up from under the tree and started walking towards the hill. He had switched his radio off and was singing to himself, though it was more like rhyming without a beat. Most of it was unintelligible nonsense. Gabriel wondered why Sam took life so seriously, yeah they were fighting a war, but on the other hand, they had a great life because of it. Gabriel started talking to himself, though it seemed like he was addressing someone else. "I mean, think about it: If not for this war we would've been forced to grow up on a boring colony with nothing to do but work and struggle to survive. Because of the war, we're super soldiers; fucking SUPER SOLDIERS! We can do shit no ordinary man could do, we can take on hordes of Covenant and survive, hell, not just survive: we can WIN!" Gabriel shook his head, "Oh well, to each his own," before continuing on.

As they arrived at the hill, Sam began speaking again. "Okay, Denal, what's our time until the Compton and the Harkonnen arrive to provide the distraction?"

"We've got roughly two hours."

"Good, okay spread out in teams of two and use your geoscanner units to get as much data as you can. We'll meet back here to set up the dummy beacon and move to the next objective. KAs you're with Spica, cover the low terrain. Denal, you and Alde get us some data on that ridge for a possible extraction point, sniper cover, anything. Sada,

you're with me. We'll get as close to the structure as we can and try to place this geoscanner unit near it; see if we can't get any more info on this relic we're supposed to discover." With that the squad split into three groups, each with their purpose as clear as day.

Zach and Chris reached the ridge after a silent run from the hill.

Zach coughed a little before attempting to strike up a conversation

"So, Chris? You still a terrible shot as you usually are?"

"Shut up Zach."

"Aw come on, I'm just trying to make conversation."

"Nooo, you're just trying to piss me off."

"Same thing."

"Fuck you."

Zach smiled, then began climbing. Chris followed him muttering death threats the entire way. The climb up was slow and they were constantly looking for something resembling a footpath, but to no avail. Eventually they reached the top. Zach pulled out his sniper rifle.

"Cover me."

"I won't let you out of my sights"

"Don't you mean 'out of your sight'?"

Chris didn't answer.

Zach shrugged and began surveying the area through his scope.

"Not much to see except some rocks, a few trees, that big structure and... wait, hold on."

"What is it?" asked Chris.

"Don't know, it's barely reading on my scope, it's like a blur in the air."

"Where's it coming from?"

Zach looked up, "I can't quite tell, let me take another look"

Zach stared back into his scope before standing up. "God dammit, I lost sight of it."

"No use crying over spilled milk," sighed Chris before taking off his helmet and pulling out another of his Radex cigarettes.

"Now YOU cover ME, while I have a smoke."

"I won't let you out of MY sights."

"Very funny," Said Chris, glaring at Zach.

"Isn't it though," chuckled Zach.

4. Chapter 4: A Demon in the trees

James and Gabriel moved silently through the sparsely forested area, slipping between the shadows of the trees, the only sound to be heard was the rustling of the leaves, then a sudden sharp crack. James made a signal to Gabriel to hold still. Another loud cracking noise echoed nearby. Gabriel peeked out once before flattening himself against the trunk of the tree and tapping the side of his helmet twice to indicate he had gone to a private frequency. James nodded and did the same.

"What is it Gabriel?" asked James.

"Jackals. I spotted at least 3, but I don't think they noticed me," replied Gabriel.

"What's their armament?"

"Seems like one's got a Type 50 SRS and the other two are carrying something that looks like a cross between the Type 33 GML and a Type 51 Carbine. I'm gonna go out on a limb and say they've got a Type 25 DEP secondary," said Gabriel, who (despite their helmets keeping any sound from escaping) was whispering.

"If that's true then they've probably got PDGs to go along with those Type 25's."

"Think we should engage?"

James seemed to think for a moment before sighing "We'll have to deal with them sooner or later, but let's do this quietly, knives only. Take out the two who don't have a Type 50."

"But what about the third one? It'll bolt as soon as we take out even one of them, and most likely call for reinforcements."

James lowered his head before pulling out his knife.

"Catch," said James, before throwing the knife to Gabriel.

"What's your plan?" asked Gabriel.

James' only response was "Do it on my signal, "and to pull out his silenced SMG, kneel down, peek slightly out of cover, and take aim. Gabriel understood instantly, adjusting James' knife in his hand and loosening his grip on it slightly, before pulling out of his own knife in preparation.

As soon as James had pulled the trigger, Gabriel had thrown one of the knives and was already rushing towards the Jackals like a bat out of hell. James' shots dropped the Jackal carrying the beam rifle while Gabriel's thrown knife took out the other one. The last one turned to run but was almost instantly stopped by a knife to its

neck.

Gabriel slowly pulled out the blade as the Jackal went limp, wiping its blood off the blade with the creature's hair.

James walked over and pulled his knife out of the other Jackal's eye before picking up its weapon.

"You were right Gabriel. Looks like the Covenant have been making some new toys. Captain Verten will want to know about this."
"

"Right, I'll get a scan of it and we'll send it to the captain along with the rest of data."

"Good. In the meantime let's move these bodies out of the open."

"You know Sam's gonna freak right?" chuckled Gabriel.

"Fuck him," replied James and he picked up two of the bodies.

Gabriel scanned the weapon before picking up the third body and tossing it to where James had stowed the other two.

James motioned for Gabriel to turn the their radios back the squad frequency.

Almost as soon as they did, Sam's voice came through their earpieces.

"What happened, why did you two go silent?"

"Sorry, we ran into some Jackals and had to focus," sighed James.

"Why did you engage? Our mission was to collect geographic data and NOT get discovered, not kill every Covenant we come across."

James sighed then responded "And how exactly were we supposed to collect data without them discovering us? Besides, we killed them quietly and hid the bodies."

"Still, you were supposed to avoid combat... Whatever, I'm going to go turn off my comm now, the buzzing from the squad frequency is getting annoying. Sada, I'll meet you on Frequency 2-3. Antares out," Antares switched frequencies and kicked the body of the dead elite in front of him.

"You don't think it was a little hypocritical to chastise James for attacking those Jackals out in the forest when we just killed this sucker right next to their base?" Laughed Antoine as he threw the body into the ravine near the forerunner structure.

"Probably, but the difference is that this one will appear as though the elite simply fell into that ravine there," replied Sam.

Antoine shrugged.

"Problem Sada?"

"No, just thinking you're not as uptight as you try to act."

"Ha. Ha. Ha," answered Sam sarcastically.

Antoine smiled before grunting out, "How long we got before returning to the rendezvous point?"

Sam checked his helmet's clock, "About half an hour. We'd best get back to the hill, the others are probably there already."

Antoine nodded and began walking back while Sam walked just a few paces behind.

As they walked back, Sam swore he kept seeing some sort of blur, but whenever he looked again it was gone. Sam shook it off as they arrived at the hill. Zach and Chris were already there, and James arrived only a moment later.

James removed his helmet and took a deep breath before saying, "Okay, we're all here, let's set up the beacon."

Antoine knelt down and took out the parts for the beacon from his combat pack. He began to assemble the beacon and in only 4 minutes had it set up.

"Ready to transmit sir."

James looked over at the Forerunner structure, "Good, upload this data and then let's get moving, I'd like to be as close to that structure as possible before things get loud."

"Yes sir," said Antoine before taking the data chip from James and activating the beacon.

James put his helmet back on and motioned the squad to follow. And follow they did, not one of them knowing the hell they were about to enter.

End
file.